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## It's a woman's world: Feminist themes from *Pride and Prejudice* to *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*

Amber Naz Haydar

University of Tennessee - Knoxville, ahaydar@vols.utk.edu

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Amber Naz Haydar entitled "It's a woman's world: Feminist themes from *Pride and Prejudice* to *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Amy Billone, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Kirsten F. Benson, Allen R. Dunn

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

It's a woman's world: Feminist themes from *Pride and Prejudice* to *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Amber Naz Haydar

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## Abstract

The overall objective of *It's a woman's world: Feminist themes from Pride and Prejudice to The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is to examine the feminist themes present in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and their representation in Bernie Su and Hank Green's recent web series adaptation of Austen's novel, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. There is first discussion of the critical conversation regarding Austen's position as a feminist, as well as background on *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. Analysis of the feminist themes present in novel and, subsequently, adaptation, follows, and the project concludes with a discussion of some of the implications of the shift from Austen's work to that of Green, Su, and other adapters.

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## Introduction

Of the handful of novels written by Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* has arguably retained the highest level of popularity since its publication. It also is one of the most dissected and analyzed in the past two centuries by academic and popular audiences alike. Current interests in Austen scholarship include her use of narrative, the multitude of Austen adaptations that have been produced in recent years, and a renewed fascination with the Gothic in Austen's novels<sup>1</sup>. One particular area of inquiry that has produced fruitful conversation of late has been the presence of feminist themes in this novel and in Austen's other works. With the rise of feminist critical theory in the 1970s, Austen's novels have been controversial in terms of their portrayal of eighteenth century society and the role of women at that time. Critics have been debating for at least the past five decades on where to categorize Austen herself in this conversation. There appear to be two distinctive sides to this issue. Some scholars are staunchly opposed to the idea of Austen as a feminist, believing she was a conservative who upheld the social and class structure of eighteenth century England in her writing. Others just as strongly support the concept of Austen as feminist, seeing her as a subversive using her novels to illuminate the need for change in the system. A subdivision of the latter group believes Austen occupies a middle ground--not entirely conservative, yet not fully involved in the feminist culture. Due to insufficient (auto)biographical information on Austen, it may be impossible to

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<sup>1</sup>Some recent critical works and collections on these issues include Lisa Hopkins's *Relocating Shakespeare and Austen on Screen*, Thomas Keymer's *The Cambridge Companion to Pride and Prejudice*, Kathleen Miller's "Haunted Heroines: The Gothic Imagination and the Female Bildungsromane of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and L.M. Montgomery," Ann Shanahan's "The Novel as Drama: Staging Theatrical Aspects of the Narrative in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*," Mary Spongberg's "History, fiction, and anachronism: *Northanger Abbey*, the Tudor 'past' and the Gothic 'present,'" Linda Troost's "The Nineteenth Century Novel on Film: Jane Austen," David Monaghan, Ariane Hudelet, and John Wiltshire's *The Cinematic Jane Austen: Essays on the Filmic Sensibility of the Novels*, and many others.

ever say with certainty what position Austen may have considered herself to occupy in this debate. As Mary Poovey accurately muses,

Our access to Jane Austen's personal attitudes to historical events and to propriety will always be blocked by her sister Cassandra, who destroyed many of Austen's letters and censored numerous others; moreover, the letters that did survive at times convey contradictory opinions and, what is perhaps even more confusing, almost always employ a decidedly ambiguous tone. (Poovey 22)

True, Austen's own private opinions on "historical events" and "propriety," and even feminism, may never be revealed to us due to the lack of a comprehensive body of personal documents, but what remains of Austen's writings--specifically, her novels--can help critics to extrapolate those opinions and therefore obtain a fuller sense of Austen's position on feminism.

The overall objective of this project is to examine how the recent *Pride and Prejudice* adaptation, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, is situated within the ongoing critical conversation about Jane Austen's feminism. In order to do so, however, it is necessary to establish the parameters of the debate--namely, the three positions on Austen as feminist: both the supporting and opposing sides of the argument, as well as the less-decisive middle ground. Following discussion of the various positions and their merits, the paper will then turn to *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, one of the most recent and innovative adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*, as evidence of how the Austen-as-feminist position translates from novel to adaptation, and what this adaptation (and others) means for the continued popularity of both Austen's novels and other works in the literary canon. Because *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is arguably the first of its kind in terms of web series adaptation of a popular, canonical work of literature, there will be a brief overview of the adaptation itself, identifying some of the fundamental alterations made from *Pride and Prejudice*

to the web series in terms of character, plot, etc., along with discussion of the additional dimensions of the series franchise. Following this expositional information on *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, the paper moves to the main argument: how the series translates and demonstrates three specific feminist themes evident in *Pride and Prejudice*. Each of these themes will be addressed first in terms of its appearance in Austen's novel, then as it is present in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. The first theme to be discussed deals with the ways in which the women of *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* either occupy or subvert traditional societal expectations, focusing specifically on the Bennet sisters<sup>2</sup> and Caroline Bingley. The paper then moves to discussion of how Austen's women (once again, emphasizing the Bennet sisters, along with Charlotte Lucas) adhere to their values and standards in the face of outside pressure/expectations and are ultimately rewarded for their tenacity. The final example offers an examination of Austen's presentation of the world from a woman's viewpoint, with the main focus being on Elizabeth and Lydia Bennet in each section. The paper concludes with a reflection on various implications of transitioning from text to adaptation, including the renewed interest in the text with the release of adaptations.

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<sup>2</sup> In this section on *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, Mary Bennet will also be discussed; however, she is not a Bennet sister in the series.



## Chapter 1: Critical conversation

### *Background on feminism*

Feminism itself was a highly controversial issue in the late eighteenth century. British Enlightenment thinkers are often credited with being early proponents of the movement, whether directly or indirectly. John Locke and John Stuart Mill are noted as key figures in discussions of eighteenth and nineteenth century feminism, but the majority of critical texts on the subject involve female revolutionaries<sup>3</sup>. One of the period's most well-recognized advocates of feminism, Mary Wollstonecraft, is often seen as a leading figure of the movement arguing for social equality between women and men, specifically focusing on education and marriage laws. While access to a better quality of education had become more readily available to women in the eighteenth century, ultimately "the goal of women's education was to attain an ideal 'womanhood'...[as] a 'proper education' was viewed as one that supported domestic and social activities but disregarded more academic pursuits" (Bomarito and Hunter 102). Wollstonecraft and her contemporaries fought to draw attention to these issues and bring about change in the existing laws and regulations. Wollstonecraft's *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is touted as one of the first unequivocally feminist texts. Wollstonecraft has in recent years been seen as less of a lone individual crusading for the feminist cause but as a member of a key group of dissenters. Arianne Chernock identifies some of these women as "part of a larger community of 'female Jacobins,'...includ[ing] Mary Hays, Mary Robinson, Amelia Alderson, and, to a lesser extent, Anna Barbauld" (3). Others, such as Catherine Macaulay Graham and Hannah More, are

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<sup>3</sup> Arianne Chernock's 2010 study *Men and the making of modern British feminism* explores the "largely forgotten but foundational contributions" of men in the eighteenth century to the feminist movement, "a feminism...explicitly interested in promoting equal rights for women" (2).

identified as having less necessarily to do with the movement itself but offer sympathetic support for the cause.

***Austen: conservative or subversive?***

Though the bulk of feminist criticism on Austen has been composed in the past fifty years, one of the earliest examples of Austenian feminist criticism came mere decades after the publication of *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen's great-niece, Fanny Caroline Lefroy, is said to have "invent[ed] a feminist critical approach to Jane Austen's work" which "anticipat[es] current scholarship on Austen's texts,...question[ing] the relationship between Austen's femininity and her literary reputation." Lefroy further offers the consideration that some of Austen's characters reflect particular traits of Austen herself, a concept that is echoed nearly a century later with Gilbert and Gubar's 1979 *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Villaseñor). By articulating Lefroy's comparison between *Persuasion*'s Anne Elliot and Jane Austen herself, Alice Marie Villaseñor identifies the significance of Lefroy's analysis and its relevance to current critical discussions of Austen. Indeed, Villaseñor muses, without Lefroy's contributions, the current critical approaches to literature--not just with Austen's works--would likely be quite different.

More recently, various well-known Austen scholars have demonstrated their distaste with the concept of dubbing Jane Austen a feminist. Marilyn Butler's controversial *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, for example, presents a rather conservative take on Austen. Butler's book is divided into two sections: in the first, Butler attempts to establish the parameters of her argument, classifying particular eighteenth century novelists into the groups of Jacobin and anti-Jacobin. As Alexander Welsh observes, Butler uses the following criteria for separating the novelists:

In general, the Jacobin novelists are just that: strong partisans of the individual passions and intuition, of reason in its iconoclastic mode, and contemners of certain social conventions. The Anti-Jacobins, by preaching and by punishing, display the wretched consequences of individualism and lapses from convention...Jane Austen's novels are enlisted on this side. (Welsh 255)

In the second half of her book, Butler examines and evaluates Austen's novels as the conservative, counter-revolutionary works she believes them to be, "demonstrat[ing] a distrust of individualism in all its manifestations" (North 39). Various critics of *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* observe problems with Butler's attempt. For instance, Butler groups Mary Wollstonecraft and Austen in separate camps (Jacobin and anti-Jacobin, respectively), a division that the pro-Austen-as-feminist camp would protest due to the similarities present in the women's works. Others, such as Mary DeForest and Andrew Wright, take issue with Butler's claim that Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* lacks a clear message<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, Margaret Kirkham takes a stand against her, claiming that "[Butler] regards Austen's stance as a moralist, in the eighteenth century sense of the word, as indicative of strongly conservative if not downright reactionary political commitment. I regard it as indicative of her sympathy with the rational feminism of the Enlightenment" (xii). In his review of Butler's book, Welsh goes on to suggest that, although Butler is attempting to demonstrate her belief that Austen's novels are "in some sense political documents," the division of her book detracts from her aim and instead highlights the inability to support her claim (Welsh 255). Despite their various grievances with Butler's approach or conclusions, critics can reach a consensus on one matter: controversial as it may be, ultimately,

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<sup>4</sup> See DeForest's "*Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (review)" p. 345-6 and Wright's "*Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* by Marilyn Butler" p. 345

*Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* continues to be a foundational text in Austen studies that positions Austen as a conservative.

Alastair Duckworth's *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* offers another take on the conservatism in Austen's novels. Duckworth argues against "[t]he extreme opinions of the 'subversive' critics--that Jane Austen undermines the social values she seems to affirm, that she can discover personal equilibrium in a society she detests only through the secret ironies of her art" (7)--in other words, Austen's novels do anything but portray the subversive individual that the critics Duckworth opposes<sup>5</sup> would have audiences see. Rather, "[g]iven the irresponsibility of others, we might say, it is the more incumbent upon the Austen heroine to support and maintain an inherited structure of values and behavior" (Duckworth 7). Duckworth believes Austen's female protagonists to be upholders of the conservative eighteenth century social structure in the face of chaotic circumstances rather than rebellious women embodying individualism.

While many critics assert that Austen's writing itself offers substantive proof of her conservatism, others believe it to actually mask her true intentions. In their *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note the following: "For all her ladylike discretion,...Austen is rigorous in her revolt against the conventions she inherited. But she expresses her dissent under the cover of parodic strategies that had been legitimized by the most conservative writers of her time and that therefore were then (and remain now) radically ambiguous" (119-20). Julia Prewitt Brown's claims dovetail nicely with Gilbert and Gubar's argument. Many critics perceive Austen's

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<sup>5</sup> Duckworth references a "'subversive' school of Austen criticism" against which his study will argue, including critics such as D.W. Harding, Marvin Mudrick, Mark Schorer, David Daiches, Geoffrey Gorer, and Kingsley Amis (6).

portrayal of societal customs as proof of her conservatism, her acceptance of them and her willingness to operate within those parameters. Brown argues against those critics, asserting that, in Austen's portrayal of these social norms in her novels, her "very intent is to illustrate their functions, reveal their strengths and weaknesses, essentially explain or criticize their presence" (24). Audrey Bilger agrees that Austen's writing offers a critique of the more conservative societal structure, asserting that "[w]riting comic novels allowed [Austen] to contribute to the ongoing debate about women's proper place in society by criticizing, among other things, eighteenth-century gender politics" (Bilger 9). Beyond the thematic issues seen in the novel, Austen's character representation also allows for a rebuttal to the conservative argument. Judith Wylie offers an interesting take on the ways in which specific characters in the novel present a subtextual feminist message:

Austen turns her comedic message inside out, by interpolating within the seemingly conservative tenor of her novels a satiric feminist subtext quite at odds with the surface conventionality, a strategy that Susan Fraiman calls "counternarrative." This dialogic style allows women writers to "argue in the same track as men" through their depiction of the "ideal" female but also to present "dissident tracks" (31) that undercut this patriarchal icon of feminine behavior. (Wylie)

This is particularly evident in the portrayal of Mrs. Bennet, especially juxtaposed with her interactions with Mr. Bennet. For example, when Mr. Bennet reacts with a "callous attitude" to Mrs. Bennet's lamentations, Wylie notes how it is impossible for Mr. Bennet to empathize with his wife's concerns, yet Mrs. Bennet is "powerless to do other than suffer and complain and then contend with being construed as 'irrational.'" However, Wylie concludes, this "irrationality

functions subversively as a protest against the system that strives to contain [Mrs. Bennet] and all women” (Wylie).

Regardless of their phrasing, the overwhelming conclusion that these various Austen-as-feminist critics have come to is that Austen’s inclusion of conservative social norms in her writing highlights her understanding of them but should not be mistaken for a passive or even enthusiastic acceptance. Her portrayal of characters operating within societal constraints is on its own a demonstration of the need for reconfigured gender and class expectations, and various elements of her writing style allude to her alignment with the feminist cause of the eighteenth century.

Claudia Johnson, in response to Marilyn Butler’s *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, takes a less-controversial approach than Butler herself does: she sees Austen as occupying a progressive middle ground, but neither staunchly supports nor rejects Austen as feminist. Rather than wield them to establish a subversive nature in her writing, Johnson believes that Austen utilized various elements in her novels, including “irony, antithetical pairing, double plotting, the testing or subverting of overt, typically doctrinaire statement with contrasting dramatic statement...[and] the device of centering her novels in the consciousness of un-empowered characters--that is, women” (xxiv) in order to counteract any claims of radicalism. Thus, while asserting her disagreement with Butler’s position, Johnson offers a conclusion that is more conciliatory than aggressively partisan.

Rather than simply make a bold, definitive declaration of Austen’s position as a feminist, I would propose a more mediated stance on the issue, as Johnson and other critics have done, by articulating that, though we can never know for certain Austen’s own political leanings, we can assert that her works express feminist themes, and therefore belong in the canon when

considering early feminist writings. John Hutcheson agrees, arguing that while Austen “contributed to what can be called a feminist literary heritage,” she did not embody a “fully feminist position” (230). Mary Poovey also claims a more mediated stance on Austen’s feminism. Laurence Mazzeno offers the following insight into Poovey’s argument:

Austen recognized that traditional expectations for women, embodied in the concept of propriety, were in great need of reforming--but she did not want to destroy the existing social order completely. Hence, Poovey argues, she “turned her creative energies to the reformation of propriety in the hope of finding within its codes an acceptable form for a woman’s desires and a reinforcement for the social orders she cherished” (241-42).

(Mazzeno 122)

Poovey, like Claudia Johnson, finds it more reasonable to argue against perceiving Austen as a radical subversive and instead identify her as sympathetic to the feminist cause without upending the social structure of eighteenth century England.

In examining Austen’s novels, I align myself with Poovey, Johnson, and others who identify Austen as occupying more mediated stance--recognizing the need for change in the system, yet rather than actively working to make changes, offering her audience a glimpse into the various inequalities. Austen’s portrayal of the class system, for example, demonstrates just that. Juliet McMaster astutely identifies the “degrees of distinction in the [class] scale” (114) Austen utilizes in *Emma*--specifically, when Emma expresses her disbelief at Mr. Elton’s disparaging treatment of Harriet, raging that he should “look down upon her friend, so well understanding the gradations of rank below him, and be so blind to what rose above, as to fancy himself shewing no presumption in addressing her!” (Austen 91). McMaster presents this example to point out that “Emma too has a vivid sense of the gradation below” (114)--in other

words, that Emma is being somewhat hypocritical in identifying Mr. Elton's uncouth nature with his condescending attitude towards Harriet, while in the same breath naming herself his superior. By creating this character who engages in the mindset of the unequal class system and at the same time expresses disgust over others' involvement in it, Austen demonstrates her moderate position on the issue. While she might not desire to take part in the overhauling of the class system, Austen recognizes its flaws and uses her characters to illuminate said flaws.

*Austen as an eighteenth-century feminist*

While many critics approach the Austen-as-feminist issue on the basis of what feminist elements are discernible in her novels, others consider the term "feminist" itself and its connotations and implications in relation to Austen. Janet Todd, for example, has criticized the tendency of critics to simply apply a feminist perspective to writers such as Austen, asserting that "it is now time to accept that not all intelligent women of the past aspired to a modern feminist view and that to assume that they did so is to silence them as thoroughly as patriarchy silenced enlightenment feminism" (Todd 71-2). To be sure, projecting twenty-first century feminist ideals onto the works of an eighteenth century writer is an ineffective attempt to establish connections between a modern audience and a novelist who lived two centuries in the past. As Austen's society differed so greatly from our own, it is granting her a far-reaching prescience to presume she would have been able to anticipate current feminist issues and address them in her novels. However, although many critics have stated their disbelief of Austen as a feminist due to the inability to place modern feminist beliefs in eighteenth century society<sup>6</sup>, it would be foolish to ignore the feminist presence in Austen's time. Though it is unlikely that Austen would have been introduced to the term "feminism" in her time (Jones 284), the concept itself would not have

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<sup>6</sup> See Todd above



been foreign to her. Women's rights were a contentious topic during the eighteenth century and certainly were something with which Austen concerned herself. Gary Kelly insightfully remarks that "feminism is always socially and historically particular, advancing the rights and claims of women within specific historical, social, and cultural conditions" (19). Indeed, though Austen's novels might not reflect the goals of twenty-first century feminism, elements of eighteenth century feminism cannot simply be deemed nonexistent in her work. And as Margaret Kirkham argues in *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction*, it is possible to see Austen in a different light if we "change our historical perspective on the Austen novels and consider them in the context of eighteenth century feminist ideas and of the Feminist Controversy of the turn of the eighteenth century" (xi). Taking a moment to ponder what, exactly, constitutes eighteenth century feminism and separating that from modern feminist ideals allows for an objective analysis of the situation, making the feminist leanings in Austen's novels even more apparent.

***Austen, Wollstonecraft, and co.***

A number of Austen scholars align the novelist with eighteenth century feminist figures such as Mary Wollstonecraft. According to Gina Luria, the Feminist Controversy was at its peak between approximately 1788 and 1810 (qtd. in Kirkham xv); as Austen was writing/publishing during the latter part of this time frame, it would be absurd to presume that she was unaware of the controversy. Furthermore, it is clear from scrutinizing her novels that Austen was a supporter of the feminist agenda; Austen's writing style, content, and portrayal/questioning of societal norms all allude to feminist leanings. Alison Suloway in *Jane Austen and the Province of Womanhood*, for example, proclaims that "Austen's satirical purposes...were as insurrectionary as those of Mary Wollstonecraft and Wollstonecraft's feminist colleagues of the 1790s and

later,” (Sulloway xvi)<sup>7</sup>, marking Austen as every bit the revolutionary Wollstonecraft had been. Lloyd W. Brown also notes the similarities between Wollstonecraft and Austen, asserting that “[Austen’s] themes are comparable with the eighteenth-century feminism of a Mary Wollstonecraft insofar as such feminism questioned certain masculine assumptions in society” (Brown 324). Margaret Kirkham asserts that Austen’s “subject-matter is the central subject-matter of rational, or Enlightenment, feminism and that her viewpoint on the moral nature and status of women, female education, marriage, authority and the family, and the representation of women in literature is strikingly similar to that shown by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*” (xi). Vivien Jones identifies a wonderful example of this appropriation of Wollstonecraft’s writing with Wollstonecraft’s own re-appropriation of an Enlightenment thinker’s concept. Jones discusses how Wollstonecraft adapted John Locke’s definition of a “rational creature” to offer a “defense of women’s rationality,” then declares that “Elizabeth asserts her moral and intellectual independence..and reaches for Wollstonecraftian rhetoric in order to do so” (Jones 283-4). Miriam Ascarelli offers an examination of the links between Austen and Wollstonecraft, asserting that “placed in her historical context, Austen comes across as a realist,...But rather than focus on how society’s restrictions could cause someone to have a nervous breakdown [as is the case in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*], Austen focuses on the reasoning skills women need to survive,” which she sees as “the ultimate feminist statement” (Ascarelli). However, she also notes that Austen shied away from publicly (in her writing or otherwise) aligning herself with Wollstonecraft in an effort to “stay away from partisan politics,” resulting in a “Wollstonecraft-like feminist critique that is less politically charged but just as

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<sup>7</sup> Laurence Mazzeno sees this as “a departure from the more centrist stance she takes in her 1986 article ‘Jane Austen’s Meditative Voice,’ in which she argues that Austen is actually a conscious mediator (193) between those who simply accepted notions about women’s inherent inferiority and proponents of women’s equality and right to independence” (111).

potent” (Ascarelli). Marian Fowler, however, goes so far as to claim that “*Pride and Prejudice* is Austen’s own feminist manifesto” (54). Overall, critics establishing a connection between Austen and Wollstonecraft find the former’s works to be at least subtly echoing themes of the latter and representative of her own feminist agenda.

## Chapter 2: Situating *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* in the conversation

The aforementioned critics and many others make a variety of arguments regarding Austen's feminism. Though I agree we cannot definitively assert Austen's personal beliefs regarding feminism, I, along with many of these scholars, believe Austen to have imbued her novels with a feminist perspective that is illustrated in a number of ways; *Pride and Prejudice* is no exception. The various adaptations of the novel that have developed in the two centuries since its publication demonstrate this to varying degrees. Much of the recent critical conversation regarding Austen adaptations has been focused on recent screen adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* (1995, 2005) and the ways in which they appeal to a twenty-first century audience<sup>8</sup>. Although not as widely discussed as feminism in Austen's novels, the ways in which Austen's adaptations demonstrate the novelist's feminism have begun to produce some degree of critical conversation. In particular, critics have begun to consider how the feminist themes present in her novels--particularly in *Pride and Prejudice*--translate to some of the works' adaptations. Opinions vary on this issue; for instance, a number of scholars believe the adaptations to be well-suited to the faithful representation of Austen's themes. In addition to noting that "Austen herself was involved in mainstreaming feminist ideals when she wrote her novels," Devoney Looser argues that "[m]ost of the recent Austen adaptations are...relatively faithful (albeit decidedly contemporary) interpretations of Austen's women and their feminist leanings" (12). Adaptations such as the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* adaptation starring Keira Knightley and Matthew Macfayden fall into such a category. Others, however, find fault with the adaptations, believing

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<sup>8</sup> see Lisa Hopkins's *Relocating Shakespeare and Austen on Screen*, Laura Carroll and John Wiltshire's "Film and Television" in *The Cambridge Companion to Pride and Prejudice*, Juliette Wells's "True Love Waits: Austen and the Christian Romance in the Contemporary US", Linda Troost's "The nineteenth century novel on film: Jane Austen" in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature On Screen*, Maureen Sabine's "With My Body I Thee Worship: Joe Wright's Erotic Vision in *Pride and Prejudice* (2005)", and many others

them to be geared toward newer audiences without maintaining the fidelity to the text. Julian North in “Conservative Austen, Racial Austen” explores the ways in which the “subversive potential of...Austen novels...is exploited or blocked in the adaptation of her work,” (40), focusing primarily on the Austen film and television adaptations of the 1990s. North ultimately concludes that the adaptations “capitalize on the subversiveness of [Austen’s] work, but more so on the fact that its subversiveness may be so safely contained” (49).

The 2008 television miniseries *Lost in Austen*<sup>9</sup> also provides fodder for conversation about Austen’s feminism as translated from text to adaptation. Alice Ridout, for example, questions “whether this adaptation of Austen plays out a post-feminist nostalgia for pre-feminism or offers a critique of our current post-feminist moment by juxtaposing it with a pre-feminist...historical period” (14). In recent years, there have been a number of adaptations that successfully balance the former qualities with the latter. With its new and innovative medium of adaptation<sup>10</sup>, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is particularly well-suited to demonstrate the transition of feminist themes from novel to adaptation. In particular, the ways in which women are perceived in the novel, as well as how they perceive the world around them, translates beautifully to *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* from *Pride and Prejudice*, showcasing some of the important feminist themes crucial to critical conversation of Austen today.

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<sup>9</sup> This adaptation is based rather loosely on *Pride and Prejudice*. Rather than offering a faithful representation of the novel, *Lost in Austen* fabricates an entirely new character, Amanda Price, who travels through a time vortex of sorts only to arrive in the midst of Austen’s novel. Price trades places with Elizabeth Bennet during the course of the miniseries, thus fundamentally altering the plot-line of *Pride and Prejudice*, and she ultimately remains in 18th century England alongside Darcy and the others.

<sup>10</sup> Although not the only of its kind, its success having encouraged the development of other similar adaptations, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is one of, if not the, first interactive web series with multi-platform social media presence that adapts a work of “classic” literature.

### Chapter 3: Background on *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*

Before delving into the ways in which *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* demonstrates feminist themes evident in *Pride and Prejudice*, it is necessary to first discuss the adaptation itself in order to provide a contextual background for the latter half of each discussion of Austenian feminism translated to adaptation. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, the most recent adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* to date, is an interactive web series developed by Hank Green and Bernie Su that concluded in the spring of 2013. The year-long project takes an interesting twist on the traditional re-telling of *Pride and Prejudice*, offering a first-person perspective of the tale. The main character of the video blog, Lizzie Bennet, sets out to keep a video diary of the happenings of her life and her interactions with friends and family. The overall plot structure follows that of Austen's novel; however, there are alterations in terms of both content and character adaptations. For example, the character of Charles Bingley is transformed into Bing Lee, with his unmarried sister being Caroline Lee; similarly, Charlotte Lucas becomes simply Charlotte Lu, while Colonel Fitzwilliam is known as Fitz Williams. There are also only three Bennet sisters (Lizzie, Jane, and Lydia) rather than the original five of whom Austen wrote in the novel, though Mary and Kitty Bennet make their appearances in the series in other ways: Mary is a cousin of the Bennet sisters, while Kitty is Lydia's pet cat. Accompanying Lizzie's video blog are videos by other characters, including Lydia Bennet (who follows in her sister's footsteps of documenting her life via vlogging), Maria Lu (Charlotte's younger sister), and even GiGi (Georgiana) Darcy. The timeline of these videos follows that of the main series, and, with Lydia's videos in particular, it is necessary to view them in order to gain a fuller understanding of the situations the Bennet family and those around them encounter. For example, the main series videos only briefly mention the downward spiral of Lydia due to her interactions with George Wickham;

through Lydia's own videos, however, audiences can see the relationship play out before them and have a better sense of what led to the disastrous situation which Darcy helps to resolve.

Additional depth to *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*'s universe is added in the form of the characters' Twitter and Tumblr accounts, which offer fans the opportunity to interact with Lizzie, Darcy, and the others. The characters follow and have back-and-forth conversations with one another and fans, much as they would were they real people. Jane's Tumblr account is something of a fashion blog, which is fitting, as she is a budding fashion entrepreneur, and often there are questions in the Q&A videos regarding where Jane gets her clothing and accessories. The characters also respond to questions posed by the fans in a series of Q&A videos published alongside the videos.

Although the web series itself has concluded, the creators of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* are continuing to add new elements to the franchise, as well as further developing existing elements. Additional videos have been posted to *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* website in the form of instructional videos from Collins & Collins (Ricky Collins's web production company) and two "bonus" videos offering insight into what the characters have been doing in the year since the series ended ("Story"). Additionally, the characters' Twitter accounts were once again active from March 10th-17th of this year. According to Twitter Fiction Festival,

The team behind *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* ([@berniesu](#) and [@noblerorick](#)) will be presenting a week long story campaign bringing Lizzie Bennet back online, almost one year to the day when she started dating Mr. William Darcy. After Mr. and Mrs. Bennet finally decide to sell the family house, Lizzie will have to postpone her birthday and anniversary plans to come back to her childhood home for the final time.

("@TheLizzieBennet")

The main characters of the web series, including Charlotte, Lizzie, Lydia, Darcy, and Jane, were all involved in the process, conversing with one another and their thousands of Twitter followers during the week-long affair. The Twitter account for the series itself has for the most part remained dormant in the time since the series's ending with the exception of relating *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* news, but it was once again active during the festival. Additionally, a novel adaptation/supplemental text to accompany *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* was released on June 24, 2014. Series creator Bernie Su has collaborated with writer Kate Rorick to develop *The Secret Diary of Lizzie Bennet: A Novel*. According to the publisher's release on the novel, "*The Secret Diary of Lizzie Bennet* provides more character introspection as only a book can, with revelatory details about the Bennet household, including Lizzie's special relationship with her father, untold stories from Netherfield, Lizzie's thoughts and fears about life after grad school and becoming an instant web celebrity" (Gutelle). The novel is already proving to be quite popular, with significant rankings on both amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com<sup>11</sup>. It has also been announced that a followup novel to *The Secret Diary of Lizzie Bennet* is expected in the summer of 2015, and its focus will be on Lydia Bennet rather than Lizzie (Whyte). These additional elements of the web series franchise, along with *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* itself, offer yet more platforms through which the feminist themes in *Pride and Prejudice* are translated.

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<sup>11</sup> The novel's sales rank on Barnes and Noble's website is 697 (barnesandnoble.com), while Amazon's Best Sellers Rank places it at #69 under the Blogging and Blogs subdivision of book sales (amazon.com).



#### **Chapter 4: Societal expectations in *Pride and Prejudice***

There are a number of ways in which Austen's feminist themes in *Pride and Prejudice* make their appearance in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. Three such notable examples include the subversion of or compliance with societal expectations, the adherence to individual value systems in the face of outside pressures of conformity, and the representation of the world from a woman's viewpoint. The first of these themes to be addressed is the ways in which the female protagonists are portrayed in their societal roles, particularly in terms of their pastimes. During the eighteenth century, a woman's prowess in recreational activities was valued much more than any mark of academic success. As David Monaghan muses, "Most governesses and academies for young ladies sought to avoid overtaxing the limited minds of their charges by substituting accomplishments such as piano-playing, drawing and dancing for intellectual pursuits" (105). While Monaghan specifically mentions these hobbies in relation to young women obtaining a formal education via governess or academy, it would be fair to assume these expected pastimes would also be appropriate for those without the resources to be formally educated. It would certainly not be insisted upon for women to aspire to "intellectual pursuits," and if they were to do so it would be outside of their societal expectations and not considered part of what makes them "accomplished," so to speak. Austen, however, clearly was not of the same opinion. As noted by various critics, Austen stressed the importance of education in her various writings. D.D. Devlin argues that "All Jane Austen's novels, and many of her minor works, unfinished works, and juvenalia, are about education" (1); Gary Kelly believes this to be the case "because they demonstrate the importance of female education to [the] social groups [who read Austen's novels] and particularly to their material interest in an age of revolutionary change" (252).

Indeed, Austen demonstrates the “negative effects of bad, informal education<sup>12</sup> upon susceptible young minds” (Chan) in *Mansfield Park* with the unfortunate but self-induced, in a manner of speaking, fates of Mary, Maria, and Henry. Had the three of them--particularly Mary and Maria--been exposed to stronger moral guidance and had less involvement with the gossipy, fashionable crowds, their lives might have turned out quite differently.

In addition to simply gleaning from society what was “proper” for young women in the eighteenth century, there were a number of courtesy books published during that period, “set[ting] forth the ideals of education and behaviour to which young persons were expected to conform, and they were required reading for young ladies throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth” (Fowler 48). These very specific standards of behavior and recreation marked a woman’s “place” in society and outlined what was acceptable for and expected of eighteenth century women, and Austen’s work demonstrates a resistance to the practice. As E.J. Clery points out, “When in *Pride and Prejudice* the ridiculous Revd Mr. Collins reads aloud James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* (1766), a work roundly condemned by Mary Wollstonecraft in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), for the edification of his young female cousins, Austen’s distaste for a still-current ideal of female identity is apparent” (161). While attempts to subvert these expectations or live by a different set of standards of accomplishment would be seen as flaunting one’s rebellion against the social structure, the mark of a feminist heroine in Austen is the ability to delicately balance societal expectations (such as those presented in the courtesy books) and personal ideals of growth and development.

Just as the courtesy books of the eighteenth century did, the characters of *Pride and Prejudice* themselves outline specifications for what qualities are fitting for an “accomplished”

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<sup>12</sup> Author’s footnote. Education, in this sense, refers more to a moral upbringing rather than academic pursuits.

woman. According to Caroline Bingley, these include “thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages,” (Austen 27), which is in line with the societal expectations of the time for young ladies. Mr. Darcy, however, offers an additional requirement: “and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading” (27). Darcy’s criteria for being an “accomplished” young woman, then, move beyond the guidelines suggested by the courtesy-books; he believes intellectual pursuits beyond those provided by young ladies’ schools are worthwhile, indicating his dissatisfaction with the accepted norms of eighteenth century women’s behavior and accomplishments. The women in the novel represent a variety of levels of proficiency in meeting social expectations, ranging from woefully inadequate to beyond accomplished.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the Bennet sisters are a wonderful demonstration of this diversity. All of the sisters (particularly Jane, Elizabeth, and Mary) engage in a variety of pastimes, ranging from reading to musical endeavors; it is noted, however, that only two of the sisters can “play and sing,” while none can draw (Austen 109). The sisters frequent dances and balls that are held locally, and they also demonstrate some level of skill with stitching, needlework, and similar pursuits. Though the eldest three sisters find it tedious at times, Lydia and Kitty delight in socialization and bemoan any lost opportunities to visit their aunt, meet the soldiers stationed in Meryton, and the like. Elizabeth, contrastingly, finds spending time with family--especially her father and Jane--to be more enjoyable; indeed, she trekked miles in unfavorable weather conditions in order to ensure Jane’s well-being at Netherfield<sup>13</sup>, remaining there to attend to her convalescing sister until Jane proved well enough to return to Longbourn.

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<sup>13</sup> The Bingley sisters, who will be discussed at length later, express their distaste at Elizabeth’s “conceited independence” which prompted her to do such a thing, putting her hair into disarray and dirtying the bottom six inches of her petticoat (Austen 24-5).

In terms of academic endeavors, the Bennet girls have had no formal education via a governess or proper school, as is usual of families of their social and financial situation. However, it is clear that at least some of the sisters have sought to better themselves intellectually. When questioned by Lady Catherine regarding their lack of a governess and formal education growing up, Elizabeth replies, "...such of us as wished to learn, never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary" (Austen 110). Elizabeth, particularly, is noted for her "uncommonly intelligent" expression by Mr. Darcy (Austen 16). The sisters' intellectual pursuits are also acknowledged among their peers; Mary, for example, is described as "the most accomplished girl in the neighbourhood," as well as one who, "in consequence of being the only plain one in the family, worked hard for knowledge and accomplishments" (Austen 9; 17). Though these descriptions of Mary's intellect are related sarcastically and later associated with her "pedantic air and conceited manner," (17), the very fact that she attempts to better herself is more than can be said for other women in the novel. The Bingley sisters, for example, do not demonstrate any sort of desire to strive for personal improvement. Rather, they are described as such:

They were rather handsome, had been educated in one of the finest private seminaries in town, had a fortune of twenty thousand pounds, were in the habit of spending more than they ought, and of associating with people of rank; and were therefore in every respect entitled to think well of themselves, and meanly of others. They were of a respectable family in the north of England; circumstance more deeply impressed on their memories than that their brother's fortune and their own had been acquired by trade. (Austen 11)

Though the Bingley sisters have had access to a superb formal education, they clearly do not meet Mr. Darcy's standards for an accomplished woman; it is likely their occupations at the

seminaries were in line with those to which Monaghan alludes, and that the sisters adhered strictly to the courtesy-books described by Fowler. Neither of Mr. Bingley's sisters shows any genuine enthusiasm for intellectual endeavors. Early in the novel, Caroline is shown to have little actual interest in the book she is reading; in fact, not only is she "as much engaged in watching Mr. Darcy's progress through *his* book, as in reading her own...which she had only chosen because it was the second volume of his," she soon tires of her book, yawns, tosses her book away, "and cast her eyes around the room in quest of some amusement" (Austen 37-8). The very fact that Caroline reads when and because Mr. Darcy reads, coupled with her inconspicuous demonstration of boredom with the attempt, clearly represents her conformity with societal expectations for young ladies at the time, and her lack of interest in more cognitive efforts.

This portrayal of Caroline juxtaposed with the Bennet girls, particularly Elizabeth, puts the second eldest Bennet sister from the very beginning leaps and bounds above Caroline in terms of her "accomplished" nature. Jane Nardin notes that "[Elizabeth's] level of artistic attainment [and] education...is, like that of the typical heroine, far superior to the average and sought for the right reasons...[and] she does represent an ideal of well-used leisure" (127). It is true, Elizabeth may partake in the more frivolous pursuits of dancing and the like, but she is also exercising her mind and working to better her intellectual status while maintaining her role in the class structure of the eighteenth century. Caroline, contrastingly, is content to remain as she is without pursuing further personal development. Jan Fergus notes that "Elizabeth...violates many of the norms for proper female behaviour, but instead of finding herself ostracised by society, she becomes mistress of Pemberley, achieving the highest social position and greatest wealth that Austen ever bestows upon her heroines" (82). Indeed, the female protagonists of the novel--particularly Elizabeth--therefore maintain their place in their societal roles, yet subvert

expectations by demonstrating their abilities beyond what is simply the traditional role of a woman in the eighteenth century.

## Chapter 5: Societal expectations in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*

In the transition from *Pride and Prejudice* to *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, very little changes in terms of the ways the female characters are portrayed relative to what they do. Caroline Lee (Caroline Bingley in the novel) is the perfect twenty-first century version of her eighteenth century counterpart, being seen as more of a wealthy socialite than anything else. Her character description on *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*'s website is the following: "Caroline Lee is Bing Lee's sister, and longtime friend of William Darcy. Caroline prefers a more cosmopolitan lifestyle, organic produce, sophisticated parties with ice sculptures and exotic foreign dishes. But in the end she prefers being wherever her brother and Darcy are most of all" ("Caroline Lee"). There is nothing in her description to indicate that she has any sort of aspirations beyond "being wherever her brother and Darcy are", and her presence in the web series reflects this as well<sup>14</sup>. Overall, Caroline retains the conceited, snobbish self that is evident in *Pride and Prejudice*, simply meeting the stereotypical expectations of a superficial upper-class woman rather than striving to achieve anything more meaningful in her life. If Caroline were to go to college, it would likely be in pursuit of the "MRS"<sup>15</sup> degree rather than any academic achievement. The Bennet sisters, however, have higher aims than to simply find a husband.

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<sup>14</sup> Though Caroline's presence in *Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is limited, she appears in another web series adaptation of an Austen novel, *Emma Approved* (based on Austen's *Emma*). Caroline plays the role of Mr. Elton's fiancée, and her character description from *Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is further substantiated--she cares about parties, food, and expensive things--nothing which would merit the title of "accomplished," nor that would go beyond the expectations for a woman of her socioeconomic class and societal status.

<sup>15</sup> Though unfortunate, it is a common stereotype that women go to college for less-than-scholarly reasons; specifically, there is the concept of women going to college to get their "MRS" degree, which, in other words, is pursuing higher education in the hopes of finding a husband to support them. Though the phrase is often spoken in jest, this is not an uncommon occurrence. Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the following official entry for MRS: "more fully degree of MRS, MRS degree. Marriage, or a husband, humorously regarded as a qualification obtained by a woman attending university, college, etc." The online resource also notes the origin of this colloquialism dating back to 1860, when it appeared in the *Michigan Journal of Education* ("MRS"), demonstrating both the age and the severity of the issue, in that it has warranted an entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Lizzie, in particular, is doing the opposite of what Caroline is--working to improve her situation by aiming for lofty academic and professional goals, which is one of the foci of the web series. While her hobbies and more lighthearted pastimes are seen only sporadically in the videos (according to the first video, she likes “classic novels...and any movie starring Colin Firth” (“Episode 1: My Name is Lizzie Bennet”)), Lizzie’s pursuit of knowledge and education is evident throughout the series, presented initially in her first video when she announces her current occupation as a graduate student in mass communications; Lizzie further expands on this by noting that she reads and writes frequently due to her studies (“Episode 2: My Sisters--Problematic to Practically Perfect”). More often than not she is immersed in work for the completion of her graduate program, whether in the form of producing her video blog as her graduate thesis project or developing a plan for an independent study to complete her degree (“Episode 52: Better Living”). Although she still goes out with her sisters to the local bar and does other, more recreational activities, it is clear that Lizzie is moving beyond mere societal expectations and seeking out personal and professional fulfillment.

By the end of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, Lydia also demonstrates her desire to move past what has simply been expected of her and strive for something more meaningful in her life. Though her *Pride and Prejudice* counterpart is not developed quite as thoroughly as in the web series, Lydia shows a progression in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* and moves beyond the party-girl persona with which she has been associated in most of the videos. In the novel, Lydia is grouped alongside Kitty as being one of the Bennet girls with “minds more vacant than their sisters,” (Austen 20), displaying her lighthearted and superficial attitude throughout the novel which culminates in her spontaneous elopement with Mr. Wickham. This Lydia shows no sign of having developed mental or emotional maturity at the end of the novel, which is quite the



opposite of Green and Su's version of Austen's character by the final episode of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. It is clear from the outset of the series that Lydia, as is stereotypically assumed of youngest children, is the most outgoing and riotous of the Bennet sisters; although she is in school, she does not seem to take it very seriously and prefers frequenting the local bar with her friends and sisters to being studious. After her ruinous relationship with George, however, Lydia determines to give up on her wild habits, opting for frozen yogurt excursions rather than pub-crawling ("Episode 94: Revelations"). Additionally, with the help of counseling, she is working to re-establish and strengthen her relationships with her sisters, from whom she had become estranged. Even if only to herself, Lydia is proving by the end of the series that she can become something more than what she has been in the past, and in the process she is breaking free of both societal and self-imposed expectations.

Mary, though not an actual sibling of the Bennet sisters in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, also sees something of a transformation during the series. She, like her *Pride and Prejudice* counterpart, only has a minor role in the series<sup>16</sup>, and she is characterized as a shy, bookish girl who likes "darkness and having no facial expressions" and "[doesn't] like anyone" ("Lydia Bennet Ep 1: Boredom"; "Lydia Bennet Ep 2: About A Boy"). From Lydia's comments on Mary's overly studious tendencies, subdued wardrobe, and biting sarcasm, as well as some of her own comments throughout the series, it is clear that Mary has never been one to seek out socialization with others--rather, she would prefer sitting at home and reading a good book to going out with others. It can also be discerned that Mary's mostly solitary nature is not entirely self-imposed; she complains about the "dumb bitches I went to high school with" mocking her for expressing interest in someone she met at the mall ("Lydia Bennet Ep 4: Peer Pressure"),

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<sup>16</sup> Mary is only in one episode of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* proper; she appears in fifteen of Lydia's videos, however, and interacts with the other characters (mainly Lydia) via social media platforms.

leading viewers to presume that Mary was subjected to some degree of mocking and bullying growing up. The combination of these factors paints a picture of Mary as what the popular slang dictionary website [UrbanDictionary.com](http://UrbanDictionary.com) would refer to as “emo”:

Genre of softcore punk music that integrates unenthusiastic melodramatic 17 year olds who dont [sic] smile, high pitched overwrought lyrics and inaudible guitar rifts [sic] with tight wool sweaters, tighter jeans, itchy scarfs [sic] (even in the summer), ripped chucks with favorite bands [sic] signature, black square rimmed glasses, and ebony greasy unwashed hair that is required to cover at least 3/5 ths [sic] of the face at an angle.

(“Emo”)

In addition to this, individuals classified as “emo” are also perceived as solitary figures without much interaction with other individuals, let alone society. Unfortunately, many of these descriptors are actually quite applicable to Mary, especially her lack of expressive (for want of a better term) facial expressions, her attire, and her dark (though not greasy) hair that covers a significant portion of her face. Indeed, Lydia even goes so far as to describe Mary’s fashion on a particular day as “more emo-tastic than usual” (“Lydia Bennet Ep 4: Peer Pressure”). As with any stereotype, once one is branded with this often-derogatory term, it can prove difficult to move past it and overcome the expectations associated with the term “emo,” especially when so many of the associated characteristics truly match one’s own personality and defining qualities. However, Mary’s continued interactions with Lydia and her other cousins, as well as her burgeoning romantic relationship, demonstrate her ability to move beyond her comfort zone and into a lifestyle that breaks past the stereotypical solitude of an “emo” individual.

As a whole, the female characters in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* wonderfully demonstrate the ability (or lack thereof, in Caroline’s case) to subvert social and stereotypical norms, just as is

evident in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Whether it is a negatively-connoted term or a specific set of expectations associated with a particular class, Green and Su's female protagonists overcome the pigeonholing attempts of specific individuals and/or society as a whole.

## Chapter 6: Values, standards, and ideals in *Pride and Prejudice*

The refusal of women to change their behaviors, desires, and aspirations based on others' expectations is another prominent feminist theme which appears in *Pride and Prejudice*. Many of the female characters in the novel find themselves in situations which present them with a choice regarding their future, and they must decide whether to adhere to their own value and belief system or succumb to the pressure of expectation. The expectation of matrimonial bliss (read: love) was an uncommon motive for marriage, often disregarded in favor of more practical benefits such as financial security and social mobility, and it was frequently settled upon by the parents of the woman to be wed and her intended<sup>17</sup>. The censure of a woman's autonomy did not stop there. Due to the various laws regarding property and legal rights (or lack thereof) of women during the eighteenth century, it was uncommon for women to assert their independence and make decisions regarding marriage, ownership of property, or even a career without the input and guidance of the men in their lives. In her chapter from *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, Jan Fergus offers an overview of some of the difficulties faced by women authors in the eighteenth century, including the inability of married women to publish without their husbands' consent and the possible hindrances presented by the fathers of single women (Fergus 3)<sup>18</sup>. Austen herself was unable to publish her early novels without aid from her father and

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<sup>17</sup> Textual evidence in *Pride and Prejudice* offers support for this claim. Not long after his arrival at Longbourn, Mr. Collins consults with Mrs. Bennet, as, "Having now a good house and very sufficient income, he intended to marry; and in seeking a reconciliation with the Longbourn family he had a wife in view, as he meant to chuse one of the daughters" (Austen 48). Additionally, though they speak with Jane and Elizabeth to begin with, both Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy meet with Mr. Bennet to discuss the possibility of their respective impending marriages. Furthermore, yet another mark against Mr. Wickham's character is his lack of parental consultation prior to his elopement with Lydia; it is only after their escape to London that Mr. Wickham has any contact with Mr. Gardiner (acting as surrogate father in Mr. Bennet's absence) to settle the arrangements for his marriage.

<sup>18</sup> The restrictions placed upon eighteenth century women writers might seem an outdated concept now, but as recently as 1965, married women in France were unable to publish written works or hold a profession without their husbands' consent (qtd. in Fergus 3).

brother<sup>19</sup>, so she clearly was aware of the limitations placed on women in terms of personal autonomy. Indeed, she makes clear her distaste for women's helplessness in the eyes of the law. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Bennet laments the sorry state of her future and that of Longbourn if Mr. Bennet is to die, excoriating English property lawmakers, Mr. Bennet, and his nephew in one fell swoop: "I never can be thankful, Mr. Bennet, for any thing about the entail. How any one could have the conscience to entail away an estate from one's own daughters I cannot understand; and all for the sake of Mr. Collins too!--Why should *he* have it more than anybody else?" (Austen 89). The entail of which Mrs. Bennet speaks entitles Mr. Collins, the closest male relative to Mr. Bennet, to inherit the family estate upon the patriarch's death due to the Bennets' lack of a direct male heir. This, in turn, would allow Mr. Collins to essentially evict Mrs. Bennet and the remaining unmarried Bennet sisters from Longbourn if he so desired. Although the exchange between the Bennets is comical<sup>20</sup>, the underlying message is clear: it is ludicrous--to Mrs. Bennet, to audiences, and to Austen--that the Bennet girls be denied inheritance of their father's estate based solely on their sex.

In addition to shedding light on the inequality between men and women in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries, Austen's novels offer multiple female characters who assert their independence in a variety of ways to counter said inequality; Emma Woodhouse, for example, is a wealthy unmarried woman who takes it upon herself to (altruistically) matchmake and meddle in others' lives. Emma's financial status allows her to live comfortably and does not

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<sup>19</sup> In *The Cambridge Companion to Pride and Prejudice*, Anthony Mandal offers an examination of Austen's struggles with publication in which he notes the ways in which George and Henry Austen aided her with the process of publication, financially and otherwise (42-55).

<sup>20</sup> This, and more generally, much of the dialogue between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, is often played off as the nervous and overwhelmed utterings of Mrs. Bennet coupled with the wry, tired retorts of her husband (see earlier discussion of Wylie). Furthermore, this comment is yet another dig at the personality and character of Mr. Collins, of whom none of the Bennets are fond.

necessitate a job of any sort, but her unofficial “job” is matchmaking.<sup>21</sup> Although Austen’s independent female characters, particularly in *Pride and Prejudice*, must endure a variety of difficulties, in the end, they are rewarded for their perseverance through marriage or other personal successes. This is not to say Austen did not acknowledge that her characters, including her female protagonists, oftentimes possessed flawed ideals or unreasonable standards of character; indeed, many of them must face difficult truths through the course of her novels and come to recognize the error of their ways. Austen’s hallmark happy ending for her female protagonists does not represent her approval of said flaws; rather, it is reward for their perseverance in adhering to their values and refusing to be swayed by others’ (erroneous, though well-intentioned) views.

Charlotte Lucas is a prime example of this concept in *Pride and Prejudice*. In an early conversation with Elizabeth, Charlotte declares that “[h]appiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance...and it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life” (Austen 16). This pessimistic approach to marriage speaks volumes about Charlotte’s expectations for her future. She does not see herself finding happiness and marrying out of love, so she would prefer to skip the steps of acquainting herself with her intended husband and simply jump into preparing her household. While a marriage of convenience may be more realistic than an idealized fairy tale marriage, Charlotte’s approach to the situation is more jaded than anything else. Elizabeth’s reply is understandably scathing: “You make me laugh, Charlotte; but it is not sound. You know it is not sound, and that you would never act in this way yourself” (Austen 16). Charlotte clearly disagrees; she is certain of what

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<sup>21</sup> In the adaptation of *Emma*, titled *Emma Approved*, Emma’s character is actually a professional matchmaker; the web series creators transformed Austen’s character from a leisurely/recreational matchmaker into a woman who “run[s] the matchmaking/lifestyle division of the developing Highbury Partners Lifestyle Group” (“Episode 1: I Am Emma Woodhouse”).

she wants out of marriage and how she wishes to go about obtaining it, and even the altruistic intentions of her dearest friend will not sway her. Soon after, despite Elizabeth's protestations, Charlotte accepts the offer of marriage made to her by Mr. Collins, relating the following to her friend: "I am not romantic you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins's character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair, as most people can boast on entering the marriage state" (Austen 85). Charlotte is acutely aware of what Elizabeth desires for her--a love match rather than simply a marriage of mutual convenience--but she is resolute. Her criteria for a content married life have been met with her future husband, and regardless of what Elizabeth's opinion is of Mr. Collins, Charlotte will not be swayed. Charlotte gets exactly what she wanted and expected out of marriage (and life) with her acceptance of Mr. Collins's proposal.

Jane, too, refuses to alter her own behavior or beliefs simply to satisfy what others might expect of her. While Charlotte can be seen as overly cynical and jaded, Jane is on the opposite end of the spectrum with her optimistic outlook. Though it is likely considered one of her best qualities among her peers, Jane's inability to see anything but the best in others often works to her detriment. Regardless of how much Elizabeth presses Jane to believe otherwise, she refuses to see Mr. Bingley's departure as any sort of malicious scheme on the part of Caroline or Mr. Darcy. As a result, she spends months in despondence, under the impression that her strong attachment to Mr. Bingley was one-sided. She also refuses to see Wickham for the scoundrel he is, in the end asserting that "[h]is consenting to marry [Lydia] is a proof, I will believe, that he is come to a right way of thinking...I flatter myself that they will settle so quietly, and live in so rational a manner, as may in time make their past imprudence forgotten" (Austen 199). Jane is idealistic in her trust in others' good intentions, almost to a fault, and though she remains mostly

unchanged in that regard at the end of the novel, she is more willing to accept the artificial geniality of individuals such as Caroline: “Miss Bingley’s congratulations to her brother...were all that was affectionate and insincere. She wrote even to Jane on the occasion, to express her delight...Jane was not deceived, but she was affected; and, though feeling no reliance on her, could not help writing her a much kinder answer than she knew was deserved” (Austen 250).

In addition to her unwavering faith in the good of others, Jane also is staunchly opposed to overt displays of emotion. Though she is fond of Mr. Bingley, she balks at the idea of flaunting her affection for him when it is simply not in her nature to do so. This is not, however, information dispensed by Jane herself; indeed, Elizabeth is the one who, in conversation with Charlotte, comments on Jane’s “disposition” and her inability to be as forward with Mr. Bingley as Charlotte says is necessary to stand a chance at securing Mr. Bingley’s affections (Austen 15). There are numerous instances in the narrative in which Jane is characterized as a soft-spoken, genuinely altruistic individual who often conceals her true feelings behind a cheerful countenance. For example, Elizabeth is forced to concede, after reading Mr. Darcy’s letter, that “Jane’s feelings [for Mr. Bingley], though fervent, were little displayed...there was a constant complacency in her air and manner, not often united with a great sensibility” (Austen 137). As Jane remains true to herself in this regard throughout the novel, even at the risk of losing her beloved, she is ultimately rewarded by Austen with her marriage to Mr. Bingley.

As heroine of the novel, Elizabeth is no exception to the pattern of female characters in *Pride and Prejudice* remaining true to their ideals despite outside pressure. However, just as Charlotte and Jane held fast to perhaps unrealistic standards (Charlotte’s overly cynical and Jane’s overly optimistic), Elizabeth is fixated on certain beliefs and values regarding the integrity of others. She prides herself on being a good judge of character, yet she finds herself mistaken



more often than not in the novel. Her initial impression of Mr. Darcy is that he is “proud...above his company...and above being pleased,” (Austen 8), and her dislike of him only increases as the novel progresses. Even with admonishments from Jane and Colonel Fitzwilliam about her unforgiving treatment of Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth stubbornly refuses to change her opinion of him. Contrastingly, she sees nothing but good in Mr. Wickham, even asserting after his abandonment of their more familiar acquaintance, “that whether married or single, he must always be her model of the amiable and pleasing” (Austen 101). It is not until she reads the letter from Mr. Darcy explaining the extent of his relationship with Mr. Wickham that Elizabeth realizes her folly: “‘How despicably have I acted!’ she cried.--‘I, who have prided myself on my discernment!--I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or distrust.--How humiliating is this discovery!’” (Austen 137). Elizabeth’s eyes have thus been opened to the dangers of relying upon first impressions and making snap judgments of another’s character without fully understanding the circumstances.

Although her beliefs and perceptions of others may have changed throughout the novel, one of Elizabeth’s unaltered standards is her desire to not marry simply to obtain greater social or material affluence. While she is practical and realizes the benefits of marriage to someone prosperous, she also desires more from marriage than financial security; in doing so, she represents a middle ground between Charlotte’s cynicism and Jane’s idealism. Her refusal of Mr. Collins’s proposal evidences her mediated stance. Were she to marry Mr. Collins, not only would the financial security of her mother and younger sisters be secured following the passing of Mr. Bennet, but she herself would be well-provided for, and likely favored with the patronage of the wealthy Lady Catherine de Bourgh. However, as she states quite clearly, “I am perfectly

serious in my refusal.--You could not make *me* happy...I thank you again and again for the honour you have done me in your proposals, but to accept them is absolutely impossible. My feelings in every respect forbid it...[c]onsider me...a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart” (Austen 73-5). Her refusal of Mr. Darcy’s first offer of marriage is further evidence of her desire for a more meaningful marital relationship. A union with him would offer substantially more social and financial stability than would one with Mr. Collins, yet she declines Mr. Darcy with even more vehemence than she did with her previous suitor:

You could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it...From the very beginning, from the first moment I may almost say, of my acquaintance with you, your manners impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form that groundwork of disapprobation, on which succeeding events have built so immoveable a dislike; and I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry. (Austen 127-8)

Once again, even assured upward social and financial mobility is not enough to overcome the anticipated unhappiness Elizabeth would face were she to marry the man asking for her hand, and she rejects Mr. Darcy without a second thought. Elizabeth’s first two refusals of marriage offers leave her future uncertain; indeed, Elizabeth would be hard-pressed to find another suitor who would come close to matching the material gains she declined with Mr. Collins, and more so with Mr. Darcy. In refusing to compromise and holding out for the prospect of happiness, however, she ultimately achieves it: her acceptance of Mr. Darcy’s second proposal at the close of the novel is done with a changed heart regarding her feelings for him, ensuring both her financial and emotional security.

Regardless of whether some of their standards and values may be flawed, the fact that Austen's female characters in *Pride and Prejudice* remain dedicated to their beliefs in spite of the push from others to change results in a happy ending for each woman.

## Chapter 7: Values, standards, and ideals in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*

Just as they did in *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte, Jane, and Lizzie of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* maintain their steadfastness in resisting others' persuasions to change. The specifics of each woman's conflict are altered with the modern setting, to be sure, yet the overall sentiment of not compromising one's ideals in the face of outside pressure from friends, family, coworkers, etc. is the same. Charlotte's primary concerns are more practical in nature: being able to provide for/support herself and help her family are the things she desires most. Lizzie, we learn throughout the series, prioritizes school and the prospect of a job in her area of interest above romantic relationships, and Jane also gives more importance to her career than her personal life. Even when confronted by individuals or groups who insist they know what is best for her, each of these women makes deliberate decisions that ultimately ensure her happiness, be it personal, professional, or otherwise.

The decision with which Charlotte is faced transforms from a marriage proposal to a business proposition. Ricky Collins (Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*) offers a job at his web production company to Charlotte. She, though pressured by Lizzie to decline, chooses to accept the job offer to work for Collins & Collins. Just as Charlotte's reasoning for marrying Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* was practical (if not perhaps one that would accommodate personal happiness and satisfaction), the Charlotte of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* decides to accept Ricky's offer because "it's an amazing and lucrative opportunity. Those don't come around every day!" ("Episode 42: Friends Forever"). Charlotte's financial situation plays a large role in her decision to accept the proposition. She alludes to her family's financial burden in the form of existing debt and the looming prospect of Maria's college tuition, and she does not want to add to that burden--rather, she wants to help alleviate it, and accepting the job with Collins & Collins

will help her to do so. Though she goes into the project with the understanding that it will not be nearly as fulfilling or enjoyable as what she is currently doing, and that she might be sacrificing personal happiness, her ultimate goal is to acquire a job that will provide sufficient financial support, which Ricky's company can give her. Ultimately, this decision pays off for Charlotte, as by the end of the series, she can happily announce her promotion: "So, uh...Ricky Collins has moved up to Winnipeg, Manitoba...so he can develop Collins & Collins in Canada...and I'm taking over Collins & Collins. I'll be running the company now" ("Episode 100: The End"). Charlotte's hard work and diligence working for Ricky has paid off, and she is now in charge of the entire U.S. branch of the company, which will be a much more lucrative position and one that allows her more power and authority. This is a much more secure and fruitful outcome than the one with which Charlotte would have been faced had she turned down the job. Had she refused Ricky, she would have not only continued graduate school (accruing more debt), but she would have completed her degree and been thrown into a job market already flooded with recent graduates with a much lower chance of finding a position. Although she may have gone against what Lizzie desired for her, Charlotte makes the right decision for herself, staying true to her values and acquiring a job that will continue to bring her personal and professional satisfaction.

Jane, too, remains dedicated to her career aspirations throughout *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. Lizzie reveals that Jane works in the fashion industry, but from the very beginning, it is clear that her job is anything but glamorous; she is essentially a glorified intern. At one point, Lizzie asks Jane how her day had been, and they have the following interaction:

Jane: I'm just really exhausted. Um, they had me running around and ordering fabrics all day, and sorting them, and making phone calls, and I think I made ten pots of coffee, and I drank probably a lot of cups of those.

Lizzie: They work you so hard, I wish they paid you more.

Jane: Yeah, but that's the price of the industry. ("Episode 2: My Sisters--Problematic to Practically Perfect")

Even with Jane's low-level position in her company, she is dedicated to her work; after all, she is drinking copious amounts of coffee in order to complete the tasks assigned to her on any given day and does so with a smile on her face. Jane also shows loyalty to the company for whom she works, accepting an offer to transfer to Los Angeles to continue working for them when the opportunity arises.<sup>22</sup> Though she is fired from the company after taking a leave of absence to support Lydia, Jane does not abandon her dreams to pursue a career in the fashion industry, her tenacity paying off near the end of the series when she is offered a higher-paying and more involved job opportunity and moves to New York ("Episode 91: How About That!").

Lizzie is clearly ambitious and considering her future career prospects upon completion of her degree. While she is still unsure of what exact job she might want following graduation, she makes it exceedingly clear to Ricky that she does not want to work for Collins & Collins: "Oh, God, Ricky, you just don't get it!...I'm not negotiating, I'm not being shrewd or calculating or any 4-syllable word you can think of. I mean it with all due respect that I possibly have left when I say that I *don't want to be your business partner!*" Ricky's observation that she will likely not be offered "anything comparable" with her "connections and degree" ("Episode 39: An Insistent Proposal") is astute; Lizzie would be hard pressed to discover another job prospect as lucrative and stable as the one at Collins & Collins, but she would also not enjoy herself making "instructional videos," as that position requires. Lizzie is firm in her decision, refusing to

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<sup>22</sup> Although Jane's decision to take the opportunity may have been prompted by the opportunity to see Bing, she insists that the "assistant merchant position" that she is taking "would be a really, really good move for my career right now" ("Episode 48: Snickerdoodles").

compromise her integrity and standards by settling for a job like the one Ricky is offering that would be less than fulfilling. Although she wants a stable career, Lizzie also wants to enjoy what she does, something she admires about her older sister's career path. Yes, Jane may have started out doing essentially grunt work in the fashion industry--but it is the first step to developing a career she would love. Lizzie, by contrast, would only find the videos produced by Collins and Collins boring and unnecessary, and she would rather do something more fulfilling. By turning down the partnership, Lizzie grants herself the opportunity to find her own career path and ultimately decides to turn down yet another job offer--this time from Darcy, to work for him at Pemberley Digital--in favor of starting her own web media company ("Episode 99: Future Talk").

Ordinarily, the extent of audience knowledge about Lizzie's future endeavors would end as the series concluded with the final episode; however, as there has been a recent revival of the series in the form of "bonus videos" taking place one year after the conclusion of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, audiences are afforded a glimpse into Lizzie's life now: "The first year of business has been challenging, crazy, and amazing. The company has been building up a strong base of online content while we actively look to foster new talent" (Dr. Gardiner Seminar: Bonus 1)<sup>23</sup>. Just as Charlotte's future has taken a turn for the positive following her acceptance of the position at Collins & Collins and Ricky Collins's subsequent departure to Canada, Lizzie has established her own successful company after her refusal to accept offers from Ricky Collins and Darcy.

In terms of personal relationships, Lizzie's dedication to her ideals also produces favorable results. Early in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, Lizzie makes it clear that she does not want

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<sup>23</sup> The recently-released novel adaptation of the series, *The Secret Diary of Lizzie Bennet*, also offers additional insight into Lizzie's life.

to acquiesce to her mother's desire to marry her (or one of her sisters) off to the newly arrived man in Netherfield: "Look, I'm all for rich, single guys, but who is my mom to tell one of us who to marry? What if he's gay? What if he's a serial killer? What if he's *a gay serial killer*? I've got other things to worry about. It's not like we're all going to put our lives on hold because some rich, single guy dropped from the sky" ("Episode 1: My Name is Lizzie Bennet"). Lizzie does, indeed, have other things to worry about, such as the completion of her graduate degree and the search for a career in her interest area. She disparages the concept of the "2.5 WPF Club," which stands for "a house with 2.5 kids and a white picket fence." Noting that her mother is likely not only a member, but "probably the president" of said fictional club, it is clear that Lizzie is nowhere near as interested in pursuing the stereotypical dream her mother wishes for the Bennet sisters. Lizzie admits that the concept of the 2.5 WPF club "actually sounds pretty nice, but it's really annoying when it's all your mom talks about 24/7" ("Episode 1: My Name is Lizzie Bennet"). Lizzie, then, would not be opposed to settling down and starting a family, but it is not as high on her list of aspirations as her professional goals. Indeed, when the majority of the first episode of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is devoted to openly mocking the t-shirts emblazoned with the opening line to *Pride and Prejudice*<sup>24</sup> and Mrs. Bennet's obsession with their new, rich neighbor, it is clear that Lizzie's values lie elsewhere. Pursuing a relationship is not one of her priorities at that time, so it would be folly for Lizzie to seek one out when she is not inclined to be with anyone--especially Darcy. Lizzie openly rebukes others' requests to try to see Darcy in a different light<sup>25</sup>, including their repeated attempts to convince her that he "really cares about the

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<sup>24</sup> At the beginning of the series, Lizzie informs her viewers that, for the previous Christmas, Mrs. Bennet presented as gifts to her daughters shirts with "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune...must be in want of a wife" printed on the front and back.

<sup>25</sup> Just as Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* maintains a favorable opinion of Mr. Wickham after his abandonment of their familiar acquaintance, Lizzie refuses to see George in a negative light after he leaves town and is (according to



people he loves” (Episode 58: Care Packages”). Only when Lizzie sees for herself that Darcy is not who she originally thought him (and discovers that he is Lydia’s rescuer) does she contemplate anything beyond cordial interactions with him.

Just as Austen rewards her *Pride and Prejudice* female protagonists with their happy endings, so do Su and Green their heroines in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. Lizzie, Jane, Charlotte, and even Lydia hold fast to their convictions and refuse to bend to the will of others, ultimately achieving their goals, be they personal or professional.

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Lydia) gallivanting around with other women in Meryton. Indeed, Lizzie says that “George and I were never exclusive. We were just dating. Casual...Yeah, okay, I may have liked him, but, um...he kept disappearing at odd times. A girl can take a hint. I mean, come on, he started flirting with *you* in my bedroom when I left you alone for two seconds! I don’t think George knows the meaning of the word ‘serious’” (“Episode 50: Moving on”).

## Chapter 8: A woman's perspective in *Pride and Prejudice*

Another prominent feminist theme that translates well from *Pride and Prejudice* to *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is the way in which Austen showcases the world from a woman's perspective. As early as 1815, writers have noted Austen's ability to "penetrate, with so much detail and with truth, women's hearts" (qtd. in Dow and Hanson 3); her novels, in particular *Pride and Prejudice*, demonstrate just that. However, many critics have taken issue with Austen's narratives, claiming that they focus entirely on women or do not give due justice to men<sup>26</sup>, perhaps because she does not fully understand them<sup>27</sup>. I argue that rather than shortchanging men in her novels, Austen places emphasis where emphasis is due. The primary focus of Austen's novels is the experiences of her female characters. Why, then, should she write with a masculine third person narrative, or frame action with the inner musings of the male characters? As a marginalized group, women in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries would be better positioned to offer a more comprehensive view of events and situations than would, say, men during the same time period.<sup>28</sup> Women would not be illustrating a construct of their imaginations, but the world as they see it--and this is what Austen offers audiences. Indeed, as Margaret Lenta insightfully remarks,

Jane Austen does not create a woman's world; she presents the real world, in which the limits on the conversation are those of the knowledge and interests of the speakers, and

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<sup>26</sup> Devoney Looser, for example, finds it odd that, although men are "at the center of Austen's prose", they have had a comparatively small focus in critical conversations compared to Austen's women (Looser). Deborah Cartmell notes that this "female focus" hinders the adaptability of Austen's novels, claiming that her "female-centred approach...poses problems for adapters given that television and film require a certain quota of men" (34).

<sup>27</sup> Ivor Morris counters this claim, asserting that "despite the limitations which literary convention subjected her to, and all that contemporary tastes and attitudes imposed on her as a woman, and whatever disqualification her own being a woman implies, Jane Austen understood men as well as she understood women. The novels...show this to be so" (Morris).

<sup>28</sup> I am here applying the lens of feminist standpoint theory. One of the premises of this critical approach is that "Marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized" (Bowell).

she allows [readers] to perceive it through the consciousness of her heroines. Her men, for example, are not creations of female fantasy...they are real men, perceived by women...The novels' form is the same as their subject matter, the record of female consciousnesses, and it is therefore acceptable that men, although important subjects, appear almost entirely as they are observed by women...Austen has shown the world how it presents itself to women. (30) <sup>29</sup>

*Pride and Prejudice*, for example offers a narrative presented entirely from a woman's perspective. Any interactions in the text, whether between women, between men<sup>30</sup>, or between a combination of both, are tempered by a female viewpoint. The majority of the novel deals with Elizabeth's thoughts and actions; rarely does Austen offer insight into the minds of Mr. Collins or Mr. Bennet, for example. Additionally, it is virtually impossible to identify a moment when there is not a woman present in some way be it physically, mentally, or otherwise. For instance, even when two male characters are having a private conversation, there is a woman close by whose thoughts on and response to said conversation are conveyed:

Elizabeth Bennet had been obliged, by the scarcity of gentleman, to sit down for two dances; and during part of that time, Mr. Darcy had been standing near enough for her to overhear a conversation between him and Mr. Bingley...[Mr. Darcy] coldly said, "[Elizabeth] is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men"...Elizabeth remained with no very cordial feelings toward him. She told the story however with great

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<sup>29</sup> In *Women Writing About Men*, Jane Miller makes a similar claim: "the men in women's novels are not just men, but men seen from a woman's perspective" (3).

<sup>30</sup> Margaret Lenta comments on the absence of Austen's male-only interactions, asserting, "That [Austen] never records a conversation between two men used to be offered as evidence that she was determined to remain within the limits of her experience...the restricting pressure which prevented her from recording all-male conversations must have been quite different" (29-30).

spirit among her friends; for she had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in any thing ridiculous. (Austen 8-9)

Just as Lenta describes the constant presence of a woman's view in Austen novels, this scene between Darcy and Bingley is bookended by Elizabeth's perspective. Readers first see that she is the one overhearing the conversation, then are given her reaction to their words. There is no insight strictly from the male perspective beyond the dialogue between the characters, and this is the woman's reality that Austen is presenting.

### **Chapter 9: A woman's perspective in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries***

The woman's perspective on the world present in *Pride and Prejudice* translates quite well to *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. The main component of the series is a video blog with a first-person perspective. This in itself sets the adaptation apart from the variety of other recent Austen adaptations. There is no element of mediation between the thoughts of the characters and the audience; in other words, there is not an overabundance of third person narration or free indirect discourse which Austen so frequently utilizes in her novels. Furthermore, the videos are recorded by a woman (Lizzie) and document her life with those closest to her. Not only are Lizzie's episodes (as well as her social media platforms) constructed around a female perspective, so are the vast majority of the other elements of the series's franchise. Lydia Bennet and Maria Lu each have their own video episodes, and the Q&A videos, which allow the characters to interact with viewers of the series, are also run by women in the series. Although the male characters do have a presence in the various social media platforms, it is often colored by their interactions with the other female characters. Twitter conversations between Darcy and Bing are frequently interrupted with Caroline's musings, and later in the series there is also involvement from Lizzie.

Even one of the most amusing elements of the web series--costume theatre--is orchestrated by primarily women. Occasionally Fitz Williams will join Lizzie in her portrayals, and Darcy himself is involved in a particularly meta instance of costume theatre ("Episode 80: Hyper-Mediation in New Media"). It is very rare that a participant in costume theatre is a male--even if those being portrayed in costume theatre are men. Lizzie and her sisters, along with Charlotte, often portray interactions they have observed between themselves and the male characters (namely, William Darcy and Bing Lee) utilizing changes in voice and mannerism along with props. Beyond the actual appearance of these male individuals in the videos, the men

are represented as they are perceived by the female characters. Lydia, for example, during a costume theatre scene in which she and Lizzie are playing the roles of Bing and Darcy, respectively, takes certain liberties with her portrayal of Bing:

Lydia as Bing: [*wildly gesticulating*] “This dance is super slammin’! So is that Jane Bennet. I wanna bang the s\*\*\* out of her! Are there any hot chicks you’d like to slip your man banana into, Darcy, my homie?”

Lizzie: [*shakes head and mouths “No...”*]

Lydia as Lydia: “What? That’s totally how guys talk!” (“Episode 6: The Snobby Mr. Douche”) )

Lydia alters Bing’s speech patterns, word choice, and body language in order to communicate to viewers her impression of what Bing said and did in this particular interaction, as well as what she infers he meant by those actions and words. Rather than being forced to read between the lines to decipher subtext, viewers see clearly from Lizzie’s bemused facial expression during the scene that Lydia is taking several liberties with her impersonation of Bing, which Lizzie classifies as a “somewhat true to life portrait” (“Episode 6: The Snobby Mr. Douche”). With Lydia’s followup of “What? That’s totally how guys talk!,” it is also clear that, while this is a facetious and exaggerated example, this sort of behavior is representative of what Lydia considers normal male behavior. This is not a constructed, imagined reality as some critics might assume--this is Lydia’s own reality.

Another example of Lydia’s reality is her relationship with George Wickham as documented through her own videos. Although Lizzie’s videos are the primary source of dispensing information regarding the goings-on in the family, it does not offer a complete picture of Lydia’s relationship with George. In fact, there is only one actual interaction between Lydia

and George documented in Lizzie's videos--the scene in which she "accidentally" spills water to prompt him into taking off his shirt ("Episode 45: Wickham Story Time"), which is well before any sort of relationship between the two actually develops. Beyond that, Lizzie's videos only provide conversations between the Bennet sisters about George, which does not show the extent of the dysfunction in the relationship. The activity on Lydia's twitter account can offer some additional insight, but her videos make it explicitly clear to audiences that George, though deceptively sweet and charming initially, becomes a manipulative, emotionally abusive partner, working to isolate Lydia from the rest of her family. George announces his love for Lydia during one of her videos, then goes on to say that "If your sisters don't approve, and you ask me to walk out of your life, it'll kill me. But I'll do that. I'll do that for you, if you ask me" ("Lydia Bennet: Episode 28: Special Two"). It is clear to audiences that George has altered both Lydia's self-perception and her perception of her family. Though it has been shaped by others throughout the series, Lydia's reality is always shown to audiences, even if it (at times) is only revealed to her in hindsight.

The various ways in which Green and Su establish *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* and other elements of the series franchise, be they social media platforms or novel adaptations, all point to the importance of offering a woman's perspective of the world. Each series component demonstrates a more comprehensive view of the world from the standpoint of a still-marginalized group than would be portrayed otherwise.

## Conclusion

While *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is a wonderful example of Austen's feminist themes' transition from novel to adaptation, it does raise the question of the ways in which audiences perceive adaptations--specifically, the "modernization" aspect of adaptation. The feminist themes that have been discussed thus far in terms of *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* are clearly not, as has been established, the creation of the web series's creators, Bernie Su and Hank Green, but of Jane Austen herself. Given that, it calls into question the usage of modernity as a concept applied to this and other Austen adaptations; the themes are a part of the original Austen novels, and therefore deeming the adaptations "modern" based on the feminist themes would be both offensive to Austen's works and simply inaccurate. Specific details, however, change from novel to adaptation, such as character names, events, and the like, and this is due to the shift from an eighteenth century time period to a twenty-first century one; indeed, Linda Troost would likely agree with this proposition, as her definition of an "imitation" adaptation dovetails nicely with this analysis of *Lizzie Bennet Diaries*<sup>31</sup>. Perhaps the term "updated" rather than "modernized" would be better suited to describing the changes to Austen's story presented in the web series. As the themes themselves are not modernized, simply re-

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<sup>31</sup> Linda Troost's chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen* titled "The nineteenth-century novel on film: Jane Austen" categorizes cinematic adaptations of Austen's works into four main divisions. The first is the "Hollywood-style adaptation," which revises vital aspects of the original text, including the plot, settings, and characters in order to make the adaptation more appealing to audiences. Troost offers MGM's 1940 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* as an example. Troost's second category of cinematic adaptation is the "heritage-style adaptation," usually taking the form of a serial. This type of adaptation is usually quite faithful to the original novel in terms of historical accuracy and authenticity--for example, the BBC's 1979 serial adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. The "fusion adaptation" is Troost's third division; this combines aspects of the "Hollywood" and "heritage" styles to produce an adaptation that is able to "connect with a broad range of viewers, tell a good story and show compelling images" (82). Both the 1995 BBC miniseries and the 2005 film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* fall into this category. Troost only briefly touches on the fourth possibility, which is the "imitation." She asserts that this form of adaptation "uses a novel's plot and character but updates the setting to focus on a modern-day highly structured society" (76). Examples of the "imitation," to Troost, include 2004's *Bride and Prejudice* and 2003's *Pride and Prejudice: A Latter-Day Comedy*. Though it is a web series rather than a film, *Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, too, would fall into the category of Troost's "imitation" adaptations.



presented, it is the content, setting, etc. that is reconfigured, leaving the novel's original plot and characters unaltered.

The desire to continue adapting works such as Austen's alerts critics to a perhaps subconscious desire of audiences to return to the past in some way. Popular elements of Austen's novels that are re-created time and again in various adaptations imply a sense of nostalgia; for instance, the old-fashioned clothing, the manner of speech, and even the proprietary interactions between men and women are all fawned over in the various adaptations set in the eighteenth century and perpetuate the continued development and popularity of period adaptations. Evan Thomas offers the following as justification for this sentimental fascination: "[a] reason behind the Jane Austen [adaptation] boom is a desire to reestablish conventional distinctions between public and private life...[or] a rather amorphous longing for more polite social interaction" (qtd. in Scholz 124). Mona Scheurmann observes that "[m]anners and ethics in Jane Austen's real world, as well as her fictional one, are tightly bonded" (93). If these themes are what audiences miss and want to return to, what better way to whet the nostalgic appetite than to continue adapting Austen and (others)'s novels?

The fact that *Pride and Prejudice* has been adapted and updated countless times is proof enough of this desire to return to a simpler time. This becomes problematic, however, when considering what a return to eighteenth century society would mean overall. There would be no picking and choosing of agreeable aspects. The various laws and regulations in place to limit a woman's involvement in politics, government, and society in general (against which feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft rebelled) are not things that nostalgic audiences would want to revisit. In spite of this, many people forget that these and countless other issues would present themselves were society to return to its "former glory."

The updating of the text through adaptation, however, mitigates the problems a return to an earlier society would present, essentially glossing over the controversial issues and focusing on those that a twenty-first century audience crave. Various changes from novel to adaptation, such as the shift from women's informal intellectual advancement to women's presence in higher education, enable *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* to better appeal to modern audiences. As academics, our primary goal when dealing with classic texts such as *Pride and Prejudice* should be to perpetuate the critical conversation about elements of the past that merit revisiting (namely, the aforementioned feminist themes). If updating old texts and adapting them to better attract twenty-first century readers aids in this process, discovering new and exciting ways to adapt works like Austen's novels (such as the interactive web series medium of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*) is not just important, but necessary to help keep these ideas prominent and part of the critical conversation.

Devony Looser poses a number of thought-provoking questions in her introduction to *Jane Austen and the Discourses of Feminism*, but one that is particularly relevant in light of the booming popularity of Austen adaptations in recent years is "Will we continue to read Austen at all, and if so, what might we gain or lose in the process?" (7). Indeed, many might fear that the presence of adaptation might turn audiences away from the original texts. With adaptations like *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, however, there is no cause for concern. The primary goal of any adaptation should be to cause a return to the original text from which it spawned--in this case, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* implores audiences to revisit *Pride and Prejudice*. It is ludicrous to think that the novels would wane in popularity, or worse, be replaced, by their adaptations. While *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* has its merits, to presume that its existence does anything other than promote Austen's novel is folly. Every episode of the web series harkens back to specific

moments in *Pride and Prejudice*, from Lizzie's opening statement of "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" ("Episode 1: My Name is Lizzie Bennet") to her sarcastic proclamation that her feelings for Darcy changed "Oh...I think...the moment I saw the offices at Pemberley Digital. You should know, those napping pods? Women swoon!" ("Episode 99: Future Talks"). Any self-proclaimed Janeite would have recited the novel's beginning line along with Lizzie in the first episode, just as they would immediately recognize that Lizzie's tongue-in-cheek admission to Darcy echoes Elizabeth's heartfelt talk with Jane in which she concedes, "[My love for him] has been coming on so gradually, that I hardly knew when it began. But I believe I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley" (Austen 248). The countless references in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* to Austen's novel evoke fond memories of the latter to devoted *Pride and Prejudice* fans; those with only a superficial acquaintance with the novel, however, would be prompted to consult the text before understanding the inside joke, so to speak.

In short, the development of recent Austen adaptations serves to reinvigorate, not diminish, the popularity of her novels. Indeed, this phenomenon has already proven to be true; a recently developed television adaptation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes texts, *Sherlock*, serves as the perfect example<sup>32</sup>. This particular adaptation's success has clearly caused

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<sup>32</sup> Doyle's various books and short stories about the famed detective were published beginning in 1887 and continued through the late 1920s. Since then, there have been numerous adaptations, with a few notable examples. The more well-recognized of these is BBC1's *Sherlock*, starring Benedict Cumberbatch. This show has seen quite a degree of success; though it originally aired in the UK, it has been broadcast in the United States on PBS and has just finished its third season. The season 3 premiere drew an average of 9.2 million viewers in the UK (Leigh), and when it premiered in the US three weeks later, there were around 4 million viewers watching (Kissell). The popularity of these shows has actually been shown to increase sales of the Sherlock Holmes books. The same year that the BBC1 series *Sherlock* premiered, Sherlock Holmes book sales increased by 53% from the previous year, moving from 53,000 copies sold in 2009 to 88,000 copies in 2010, and the number increased even more the following year. Some suggest that the recent *Sherlock Holmes* films were also a contributing factor, but as the numbers were not shown to significantly increase from 2008 to 2009 (when the first film was released), it is likely that the television series alone was the sole reason behind the jump in sales. Weekly sales during the series also increased drastically, more than doubling from the week prior to the premiere to the week of the premiere (Jones).

a renewed popularity in Doyle's works; it stands to reason that a popular, award-winning adaptation<sup>33</sup> like *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* will only serve to do the same for Austen's novels. However, it is difficult to compile definitive, qualitative evidence of such a claim. As Adelle Waldman muses, centuries-old books such as Austen's are often in the public domain, making it difficult to comprehensively monitor the sales of said books as is done for new releases. However, compared to recent best-sellers, books such as *Pride and Prejudice* still maintain a relatively strong position in terms of sales<sup>34</sup>. According to Nielsen Bookscan, over 2.75 million copies of *Pride and Prejudice* have sold in the United States since 2004, with nearly 900,000 having sold in the UK since 1998. Additionally, the *Pride and Prejudice* sales in the UK increased from 41,410 copies in 2012 to 45,195 copies in 2013 (Bremner). This increase coincides with the production of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*; as there were no other major *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations released during the same time frame, the web series is likely the primary culprit for increase in sales. In addition to helping boost sales of *Pride and Prejudice*, the popularity of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* prompted the creators of the web series to develop two additional adaptations based on Austen's works: *Welcome to Sanditon* and *Emma Approved*, based on *Sanditon* (Austen's unfinished novel) and *Emma*, respectively. Each of these series has also seen a degree of success, and while *Welcome to Sanditon* has already been completed, *Emma Approved* is an ongoing project. Just as *Sherlock* has done for Doyle's writings, and the

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<sup>33</sup> Currently, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* has over 40 million views on Youtube. According to the series's press release, "Other notable achievements for *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* include, [sic] the 2012 TV.com award for Best Web Series as well as the IAWTV and Streamy awards for Best Interactive Series. It's [sic] recent Kickstarter campaign raised over \$462,000, with 771% funded and ending \$400,000 over it's [sic] initial \$60,000 goal, pre-selling over 5,800 DVDs." Additionally, and perhaps more significantly, the web series received a Creative Arts Emmy for Outstanding Creative Achievement in Interactive Media in an Original Program in 2013 ("Press Release").

<sup>34</sup> In 2002, *Pride and Prejudice* sold 110,000 copies excluding academic sales of the book. Waldman compares this to the 73,337 copies sold in the same year of John Grisham's *The Runaway Jury*--1996's number-1 bestseller.

various web series have done for Austen's novels, so will future adaptations do for the works of other writers of the literary canon.

Regardless of the impact that Austen adaptations have on current and future sales of the author's works, the critical implications of the thematic translations from text to adaptation are undeniable. It is clear that both Austen's novels and the recent adaptations thereof (specifically, *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*) offer audiences a glimpse of the feminist issues that were present during Austen's time and an updated perspective on said issues, respectively. This study does not claim to offer substantive proof of Austen's personal opinions on feminism, but instead notes her awareness of the cause and her inclusion of it in her writing. It should also be noted that the feminist themes present in *Pride and Prejudice* that appear in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* are by no means limited to those discussed earlier; in fact, it is my hope that this study will offer a gateway into a new subdivision of Austen feminist studies dealing specifically with the recent web series adaptations of Austen's novels.

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### Vita

Amber Naz Haydar was born in Jonesboro, AR, to the parents of Aslam and Sameera Haydar. She attended the Jonesboro public school system, graduating in the top 1% of her class from Jonesboro High School in May 2008. Amber enrolled in the Honors College at the University of Central Arkansas in Conway, AR in August 2008, majoring in English literature with minors in Spanish and Interdisciplinary Studies, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in May 2012. She accepted a graduate teaching assistantship at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in the English department with an emphasis on 19th century British literature. Amber is graduating with a Masters of Arts in English literature in December 2014.